

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

## 1. Name of Property

historic name The Leaning Tower of Niles

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Multiple Property Listing N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

## 2. Location

street & number 6280 West Touhy Avenue

☐

not for publication

city or town Niles

☐

vicinity

state Illinois

county Cook

zip code 60714

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this **x** nomination        request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property **x** meets        does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:        national        statewide **x** local

Applicable National Register Criteria:        A        B **x** C        D

Signature of certifying official/Title: Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

Date

Illinois State Historic Preservation Office

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property        meets        does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official

Date

Title

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

       entered in the National Register

       determined eligible for the National Register

       determined not eligible for the National Register

       removed from the National Register

       other (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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## 5. Classification

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

<input type="checkbox"/>	private
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only **one** box.)

<input type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
		buildings
		site
1	1	structure
	12	object
1	13	<b>Total</b>

**Number of contributing resources previously  
listed in the National Register**

N/A

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Recreation and Culture: Outdoor Recreation

Industry/Processing/Extraction: Waterworks

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Recreation and Culture: Outdoor Recreation

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Other: Mimetic Architecture

(Romanesque)

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: Concrete

walls: Concrete

roof: Concrete

other: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity).

**Summary Paragraph**

The Leaning Tower of Niles is located in the Village of Niles in Cook County, approximately 15 miles from downtown Chicago. Begun in 1931 and completed in 1934, the reinforced concrete structure is a half-sized replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy. It was originally built to house the water tanks and pumps for two swimming pools in a 22-acre recreational park along Touhy Avenue. The 8.7 story concrete tower is located on Village of Niles property with an address of 6280 W. Touhy, just south of the Leaning Tower Y.M.C.A. at 6300 W. Touhy Avenue. The nomination includes the tower, a contributing structure; two sculptures of lions, four fountains, and six free-standing columns, all noncontributing objects; and the reflecting pool, a non-contributing structure.

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**Narrative Description**

**Setting**

The Leaning Tower of Niles is located in the southeast side of the city, an area that was mostly rural until the late 1950s when it was developed into a commercial district of shops and businesses. The structure is located in the northwest quadrant of a landscaped plaza, near the northeast corner of West Touhy and Mobile Avenues. The non-contributing plaza, built in 1995, measures approximately 210 by 160 feet and is accessed off of Touhy Avenue by a driveway that leads to the Leaning Tower Y.M.C.A. Parking spaces abut the plaza's northern edge and a sidewalk lines the southern edge. Trees lining the eastern edge of the property and the landscaped area west of the driveway shield the plaza from its commercial surroundings.

The plaza features pathways, planters, fountains, and a reflecting pool, and is landscaped with mature deciduous and coniferous trees alongside lower manicured shrubbery that evokes a park-like setting. It is accessed by three pathways from the sidewalk along Touhy Avenue and one pathway on the northwest corner by the parking lot. The pathway on the northwest corner is closest to the tower and leads to an opening where the entrance is accessed. The opening has planters with two, non-contributing statues of lions that were placed there when the plaza was remodeled. The pathways and plaza are inlaid in a herringbone pattern. Darker colored bricks are used to accent the four small fountains and the larger pool, mimicking their curved and semicircular shapes, respectively. The pathways are arranged in five

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concentric half circles with the outer shaped into a semicircle mirroring the shape of the top of the nearby reflecting pool. The semicircular area denotes the easternmost entrance to the plaza; it is lined with wrought iron fencing, shrubs, and flowers. Six Tuscan columns, three on each side, are equally spaced along the fence.

The reflecting pool is 30 feet long, and is placed on a diagonal between the tower and the plaza's easternmost entrance. The "top" is semicircular and the "bottom" -- nearest the tower -- is curved. On each side of the reflecting pool are two smaller, curved concrete fountains and two large concrete planters. These are arranged in a semicircular pattern. Additional planting beds are located to the north and west of the tower.

## Description

The Leaning Tower has an overall height of 94 feet, is 28 feet in diameter, and leans 7.4 feet towards the south. Each of the eight stories is topped by a cornice, with the top floor -- the bell tower -- being the most ornate. The core of the tower has a cylindrical shape and is constructed out of cast-in-place concrete with 10-inch-thick concrete walls. Floor slabs project approximately 4 feet at the exterior of the tower forming a balcony at each floor level. The core enclosure has four small windows and a metal door on floors two through seven. A total of 24 ornamental precast concrete columns are at each level (2nd through 7th floor), evenly spaced around the perimeter of the balconies. Each column is round in section and consists of a 10-inch wide square base, tapered shaft (7-inch diameter at the bottom to 6-inch diameter at the top), and a Corinthian capital. Precast concrete arches span the columns at each typical floor. Each floor balcony has 36-inch high metal railings anchored into precast columns. Floors two through seven are connected with curved exterior metal stairs. The treads have decorative tiles. Metal spiral stairs are located between the 7th and 8th floors, running through the center of the main core. Metal ladders provide access to the roof of the tower with a metal hatch at the top. On the second level a small, corrugated metal structure over the staircase from the first floor provides shelter from the elements.

The wall of the ground level of the tower has 12 pilasters with Corinthian capitals and precast arch panels spanning between them. The exterior wall has 7 arched windows protected by grilles and ornamental, recessed diamond-shaped panels directly below the center of the arches. The entrance of the tower is located on the south side and consists of a metal door set between two glazed precast

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columns with Corinthian capitals. The columns support a decorative glazed precast curved pediment that frames a Madonna and Child bas relief, a replica of one on the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

The roof of the tower is a flat, cast-in-place concrete slab with decorative slab edge. The roof is accessible from the tower and has a metal round pipe railing. Eight flag pole holders are located directly next to the vertical railing posts at the top of the roof, with one larger flag pole holder located in the center.

The eighth floor – also referred to as the bell tower –has five bells. Three of the bells are inscribed as dating from the years 1623, 1735, and 1747, cast by Italian bell founders. A fourth bell has no markings and cannot be identified. The fifth bell is dated 1912 and was cast by the Pacific Brass Foundry of San Francisco. The arches in the bell tower are covered with wire netting. Steel frames supporting the bells are anchored into the concrete core wall. The core wall is clad on its exterior face with 8 half circle ornamental precast concrete columns, precast arch panels spanning between columns, and precast coping at the top of precast arch panels around the perimeter of the tower. The bells are permanent fixtures original location in the tower, but have been temporarily removed for repair. They will be placed back in their same location later this year (2019).

The interior of the ground floor has a round central room and doors leading to six smaller rooms around the center. The tile floor has a decorative star pattern in the center. Shelving in some of the small side rooms attests the former use of this space as a gift shop, but the space is currently only used for storage. A bathroom was located in one of those six rooms, however it has since been long removed. The stairs which lead to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor are adjacent the entrance which is one of the six rooms on the ground floor. Floors two-through-seven all have an empty room in the core enclosure, each accessed from the balcony by a metal door.

## **Integrity**

The Leaning Tower has sufficient integrity for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The exterior looks as it did when it was completed in 1934, retaining its integrity of design. The property no longer functions as a water tower as it did during its use in the 1930s. The large wooden casks that once held water on the 5th and 6th floors have been removed, as has the pumping equipment that was once installed on the lower level. In the 1990s the tower and the site underwent a major renovation. Repairs were made to the tower, which included fixing the delaminated concrete at the areas that were cast in place (the top and underside of the floor slabs) and precast concrete panels and coping edges;

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tuck pointing and/ or replacing sealant in the joints between the precast areas; enclosing openings in the floor slabs at the building core on floors 2 - 6; replacing the doors at all levels and windows; repainting the metal staircase and replacing the tiles on the treads that had cracked; applying concrete sealer; placing the bas relief statue above the entrance; and installing new light fixtures and electric conduits on each floor. None of the changes altered the tower's original appearance. The structure continues to be recognized as a replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and is structurally sound due to the original techniques used in its construction.

The setting of the Leaning Tower of Niles has changed greatly since it was the centerpiece of Ilgair Park. Mostly rural until the late 1950s, the area was developed into a commercial district of shops and businesses. In 1995, the plaza was built around the tower. While the plaza does not contribute to the property's significance, the reflecting pool, fountains, and landscaping evoke the park setting that once surrounded the tower.

Like the original Tower of Pisa, the Leaning Tower has multiple bells. Although the bells are mounted in the same location within in the Tower, they are currently being repaired outside the structure and will be placed back into their original location later this year.

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Architecture

### Period of Significance

1934

### Significant Dates

1934

### Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

### Cultural Affiliation (if applicable)

### Architect/Builder

Architect Albert L. Farr

Architect N. Silvestri

Engineer August Ferngren

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**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations).

The Leaning Tower of Niles was completed in 1934 and is the only replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa in the world. It is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places for local significance under Criterion C for architecture, as a good example of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mimetic Architecture. Commissioned by Robert Ilg, owner of ILG Eclectic Ventilating Company in neighboring Chicago, the tower became the focal point of Ilgair Park, a 22-acre private park for Ilg built for his employees where they could relax and swim in the countryside on weekends. The period of significance is 1934, the year the structure was completed.

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**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

### **Mimetic Architecture**

The Leaning Tower of Niles, a replica Leaning Tower of Pisa, is an example of Mimetic Architecture. Also referred to as Programmatic or Novelty Architecture, this style of building or structure may imitate actual landmarks, like the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas, or may take the shape of larger-than-life people or animals (Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox in Bemidji, Minnesota -1936), objects (the Wigwam Hotels/Villages, extant in Arizona, California, and Kentucky, 1930s – 1940s), or food (Randy's Donuts, Inglewood, California – 1953).<sup>1</sup>

While generally thought of as a 20<sup>th</sup> Century trend, the concept behind Mimetic Architecture dates back thousands of years to Ancient Rome as seen in the unique topiary and grotesque figures found in the gardens of Roman patricians. While scarce examples were displayed in medieval gardens, this custom was renewed during the Italian Renaissance, with the most notable being the Garden of Bomarzo in Lazio (locally known as the Park of Monsters) and the Zuccari Palace in Rome (also called the Monster House). Exotic architecture became a fixture in England and European picturesque gardens of the 1700s, which included replicas of Asian and primitive structures.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of using animal forms for buildings has been around for centuries. Jean Jacques-Lequeu, a French visionary architect (1757-1826) designed a cow barn in the shape of a cow.<sup>3</sup> Another French architect, Charles Francois Ribart (1776 – 1883) designed an addition to the Champs Elysee, where the Arc de Triomphe currently stands, in the shape of an elephant.<sup>4</sup> The design was rejected, but later

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<sup>1</sup> "Novelty Architecture." *Wikipedia*. Retrieved 01 Aug 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novelty\\_architecture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novelty_architecture).

<sup>2</sup> David Gebhard, "Programmatic Architecture: An Introduction." *Society for Commercial Archeology Journal*, v. 13 n. 2, Spring-Summer, 1995, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> "Jean Jacques Lequeu." *Wikipedia*. Retrieved 10 Jan 2019. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Jacques\\_Lequeu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Jacques_Lequeu)

<sup>4</sup> "Charles Francois Ribart." *Wikipedia*. Retrieved 10 Jan 2019. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Ribart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Ribart)



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Napoleon I proposed a similar idea with a 78 foot high, commemorative bronze elephant, the Elephant of the Bastille, to be cast with the guns seized at the Battle of Friedland. While the plans were never fulfilled due to Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, a plaster model was completed. In poor condition, it was destroyed in 1846.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the best known elephant building still stands today. Lucy the Margate Elephant, in Margate, New Jersey, was constructed in 1881 by James V. Lafferty of Philadelphia. Built to promote real estate in South Atlantic City, the 65 feet tall elephant did not serve as a hotel but included a nearly 40 foot long main hall, accessed by spiral staircases in the elephant's legs. The hall provided access to the howdah on top. Lucy, which remains a huge tourist attraction to this day, was listed in the National Register in 1971 and became a National Historic Landmark in 1976.<sup>6</sup>

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Mimetic Architecture became an accepted way to advertise. Early examples restaurants in the shape of a ship (Venice, California -- 1903-04) or log cabin (San Diego, California -- 1911), an automotive garage with a tire-shaped entrance (Minneapolis, Minnesota -- 1908), and a blacksmith shop with horseshoe-shaped windows and entrance, and "anvils" topping the cornice (Glendive, Montana -- 1910).<sup>7</sup>

Post World War I, when automobile travel became commonplace in the United States, the use of Mimetic Architecture as a form of advertising became a trend. Large and fanciful forms became a necessary means to attract customers in the automobile age:

...a wild new architecture of communication came out of California. Suddenly you could buy lemonade from a building shaped like a lemon -- ice cream from an igloo -- film from a shop shaped like a camera. Buildings also took forms without rhyme or reason -- diners shaped like boxing gloves, zeppelins, dogs, and pumpkins. Pure means for catching a driver's eye.

Architecture is supposed to be more subtle than that. It should tell its function indirectly. But there's little time for subtlety at 60 miles an hour.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Elephant of the Bastille." *Wikipedia*. Retrieved 10 Jan 2019.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elephant\\_of\\_the\\_Bastille#Demolition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elephant_of_the_Bastille#Demolition)

<sup>6</sup> "Margate Elephant, Atlantic Avenue & Decatur Street, Margate City, Atlantic County, NJ." *Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record*. "HABS/HAER Review." 1976: HABS NJ,1-MARGCI,1-. Retrieved 09 Jan 2019.  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/hhh.nj0006.sheet.00001a/?co=hh>; National Register of Historic Places, "Lucy" The Margate Elephant, Margate City, Atlantic County, NJ, 71000493.

<sup>7</sup> Gebhard, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Lienhard, "No. 799: Mimetic Architecture." *The Engines of Our Ingenuity*. Retrieved 09 Jan 2019.  
<https://www.uh.edu/engines/epi799.htm>

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While particularly successful in Southern California, by the early 1930s, Mimetic Architecture in the form of advertisement was found from coast to coast. Mostly occurring during the 1920s-1950s when new roads and freeways were constructed across the country, Mimetic Architecture has also been referred to as Roadside Architecture.

The term Mimetic Architecture is generally used for buildings with for human occupancy, such as restaurants and hotels, but other examples were found in structures, such as water towers or farm silos.<sup>9</sup> ([https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Novelty\\_architecture](https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Novelty_architecture)). While fanciful, these were functional:

The transformation of mundane utilitarian structures, such as water towers and silos - into Programatic [sic] advertising occurred across the country from the mid 1920's down to the present moment. Rural farm silos could become bottles selling automotive oil, and water towers could by the seeming touch of a wand become a pineapple or a strawberry.<sup>10</sup>

Not all Mimetic Architecture from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is classified as automobile-oriented or commercial-driven. Some examples were strictly for personal enjoyment:

One important form of twentieth century Programatic [sic] architecture which lies as outside of the commercial world were personal, often private idiosyncratic folk follies. In a way, these folk follies were the common man's answer to the world of selling and of financial profit. Here, often placed in a small suburban backyard garden, an individual could create his or her own world of make-believe, by introducing strange and unlikely forms generally reduced to the scale of a child's toy (or in a few instances they assumed the grandeur of structures such as Simon Rodia's Watts Tower in Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup>

Some distinguish these architectural "follies" from Mimetic Architecture because they do not serve a function. Whether functional or strictly folly, the larger-than-life objects, structures, and buildings either were built, or have become, a means to attract people:

Although these attractions may be built for different purposes – to advertise produce in the case of the Jolly Green Giant [Blue Earth, Minnesota - 1978] or to showcase a museum collection like the Grand Guitar [Bristol, Tennessee –1983] – many large roadside attractions serve a dual purpose related to tourism, getting travelers off a main road and into secondary roads where local shops and hotels are located. These large

<sup>9</sup> "Novelty Architecture." *Wikivoyage*. Retrieved 01 Aug 2018. [https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Novelty\\_architecture](https://en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Novelty_architecture).

<sup>10</sup> Gebhard, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

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structures or buildings are the bait, often placed at the entry to a community....There is nothing subtle about the buildings or their purpose, which is to get the driver off the highway and into the community to spend money. These buildings not only reflect the unique identity and help establish the identity of a community, they also sustain and promote the community's identity.<sup>12</sup>

While its popularity peaked during the 1950s, Mimetic Architecture has not completely fallen out of fashion. The most recent examples, in the United States, include the Kansas City Public Library's parking garage (2004) designed to look like a giant bookshelf, and Apple's Chicago Michigan Avenue store (2018), that resembles a MacBook cover. The style – once dismissed by planners and architects – has endured and continues to have universal appeal.

**Robert A. Ilg: The Man behind the Tower**

A native of Germany, Robert Alexander Ilg (1879 – 1964) came to San Francisco, California in 1890 with his widowed mother at the age of eleven. In 1908 he started his own venture, the ILG Electric Ventilating Company of Chicago, Illinois, a fan motor and fan manufacturing company. Within just a few years, the company became the leader in commercial and industrial markets across the nation. From the late 1920s into the mid-1930s, the company expanded its products from the commercial market to the household market by developing a fan line for kitchens and homes, which were especially popular during the hot and humid summers in Chicago. During this same time, ILG Electric Ventilating Company expanded its research capacity as it also began to develop a comprehensive design guidebook for engineers and designers among other catalogs. As the company grew, so did its employees. By the early 1940s, ILG Electric Ventilating Company opened a second research facility. The company produced commercial and industrial fans, ventilators and blowers, electric, hot water, steam and gas unit heaters, roof top air-handling AC Units and air filtering units for commercial and industrial buildings. In the 1950s, ILG Electric Ventilating Company products became iconic images with its spun aluminum roof and wall ventilators and square duct fans. Their innovative use of cold metal processing of spun aluminum machines led to the establishment of the General Blower Co., a subsidiary of ILG Electric Ventilating Company. This reestablished the company as leader in the industry represented by multiple sales offices and distributing centers across the US, Canada and overseas.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> National Register of Historic Places, "Grand Guitar." Bristol, Sullivan County, TN, 14000057, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> ILG Electric Ventilating Company, Chicago, Illinois. Retrieved on 1 Aug. 2018 from <http://www.ilgfan.com/Archives/ilghistory.pdf>

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Robert Ilg was a progressive businessman and provided for his workers. His company was among the earliest private companies to offer profit sharing and benefits to its employees. He also built Ilgair Park, a 22 acre site for his employees to enjoy at company picnics and on the weekends. The park was located in the Village of Niles, a nearby suburb of Chicago where Ilg resided.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Construction of the Leaning Tower of Niles**

Ilgair Park contained two outdoor pools and a recreational lake which needed a large water tank to function. Not wanting to ruin the park's natural beauty, Ilg decided to hide the water tower and pumping station inside a replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.<sup>15</sup> The replica, which was 94 feet tall, would be slightly over half the size of the original in Pisa, be 28 feet in diameter and, would lean 7.4 feet.<sup>16</sup> The original leans about 13 feet.<sup>17</sup> The tower was built of concrete while the original was constructed of marble.<sup>18</sup> Robert Ilg commissioned San Francisco architect Albert L. Farr for the project, which was completed in 1934. Ilg dedicated the tower to the memory of Galileo, who was thought to have used the original tower in physics experiments. A plaque was placed on the tower in Niles by Ilg that read, "This tower is dedicated to all who contribute and strive to make this earth and its unlimited resources, materially and scientifically, a better place for mankind." Ilg expressed the hope that his replica would inspire young visitors to explore the wonders of science. The setting of Ilgair Park also was said to evoke the beauty and tranquility of the Italian countryside.

### **The Leaning Tower of Niles and Mimetic Architecture**

The Leaning Tower of Niles is a good example of Mimetic Architecture as applied to a water tower. Other extant examples of water towers constructed from the same period include the Brooks Catsup Bottle in Collinsville, Illinois (1949), and the Ear of Corn Water Tower in Rochester, Minnesota (1931). The Leaning Tower of Niles differs from these in that it was not built to advertise a product, rather it was an extravagant way to conceal a functioning water tower. While Ilg's replication of the Leaning Tower of Pisa might be considered unusual, the Leaning Tower of Niles was more than a folly – it was a functional structure.

### **The Leaning Tower Today**

Shortly before Robert Ilg died, he and his wife donated 4.5 acres of land from the original Ilgair Park site and the Leaning Tower to the YMCA, on the condition that the organization spend \$500 every

<sup>14</sup> "Niles." *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. Retrieved on 16 Jan 2019. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/893.html>)

<sup>15</sup> Joseph W. Zurawski. *Niles Centennial History, 1899-1999*. Marceline, Mo.: Walsworth Pub. Co., 1999, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 116. Measurement vary for the original tower.

<sup>17</sup> Matt Soniak, "Why does the Leaning Tower of Pisa Lean?" Mental Floss, February 26, 2018. The measurement was from 2008.

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year on maintenance for the property and its surrounding environs until the year 2059.<sup>19, 20</sup> It is not surprising that Ilg left the property to the organization; he placed great importance on recreational and leisure activities as part of a healthy lifestyle as he often reminisced about spending recreational time at the San Francisco YMCA while growing up. As a child, life was not easy for Robert Ilg and in his own words he said, "...the San Francisco YMCA was kind to me during those lean years...If I could, I would repay the kindness shown to me."

The property, which became a successful tourist attraction and symbol of Niles, proved costly to maintain. Cracks had formed in the concrete. These expanded with every freeze-thaw cycle. In 1995, the Village of Niles, recognizing the value of the property to the community and visitors alike, spent over one million dollars to restore the tower and build the plaza, which included landscaping, a reflecting pool, and 4 fountains.<sup>21</sup> The property's value gained new meaning when a report issued by the Chicago Bell Advocates (CBA) in 2017 affirmed that three of the tower's five bells were Italian in origin and dated from the 17th and 18th centuries. One of the three was likely cast for the Village of Cavezzo, Italy, and the two others were likely cast for elsewhere in Italy. The founders of two of these bells are noted as Pedretti and Giovanni Castagnina. The provenance of these three bells is unclear; at least one of the bells likely hung in the St. Gilles church in Cavezzo, but their routes to Niles may have been long and circuitous. The three European bells are significant cultural treasures: only a fraction of European bells from the 17th and 18th centuries survive today, and the vast majority have not been exported to distant continents as in this case. According to the report, the other bells are more recent (thought to be cast in the late and early 20<sup>th</sup> century), are not as unusual, and do not carry the same level of prestige and historical interest.<sup>22</sup>

The Village has continued its commitment to the preservation of the Leaning Tower of Niles, and on July 31, 2017, it acquired the tower from the Y.M.C.A as part of long-term vision for the area. The acquisition by form of a donation agreement preserved the conditions of the Estate of Robert A. Ilg to maintain the property Leaning Tower of Niles. The Village plans to redevelop the area and construct a new park, concert venue and community center with the tower as a focal point. The bells are currently being restored and upon completion, will be reinstalled in the tower.

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<sup>18</sup> Zurawski, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Zuvarski, p. 116. Some accounts claim he left the property in his will.

<sup>20</sup> Some accounts indicate that Ilg left the property to the YMCA in his will, but the donation is noted in his obituary in the Chicago Tribune on December 29, 1964, page A3. The obituary was retrieved on 10 Jan 2019 from Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society [https://www.rpwrhs.org/w/index.php?title=Ilg,\\_Robert\\_A.](https://www.rpwrhs.org/w/index.php?title=Ilg,_Robert_A.)

<sup>21</sup> Zuvarski, p. 116

<sup>22</sup> Chicago Bell Advocates, "Report on Ages, Founders, and Provenance of the Five Bells of the Leaning Tower of Niles." June 1, 2017.

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## Conclusion

The Leaning Tower of Niles is important as a good local example of Mimetic Architecture. Initially built for Robert Ilg's employees, the tower has become a center for community gatherings as well as a popular roadside attraction. While the setting has changed from a large park to a landscaped plaza, the tower retains excellent integrity and deserves to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

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## 9. Major Bibliographical References

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)  
☐ previously listed in the National Register  
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register  
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark  
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

☐ State Historic Preservation Office  
☐ Other State agency  
☐ Federal agency  
☐ Local government  
☐ University  
☒ Other  
Name of repository: Niles Historical Society

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): \_\_\_\_\_

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property** Less than 1 acre

(Do not include previously listed resource acreage; enter "Less than one" if the acreage is .99 or less)

### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_  
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1	<u>42° 0'44.67"N</u>	<u>87°47'2.27"W</u>	3	_____	_____
	Latitude	Longitude		Latitude	Longitude
2	_____	_____	4	_____	_____
	Latitude	Longitude		Latitude	Longitude

### Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The Leaning Tower of Niles property is bounded by Touhy Avenue on the east, the YMCA parking lot on the west, a neighboring business parking lot to the north, and the YMCA driveway to the south.

### Legal Description of Property

THAT PART OF THE WEST HALF OF THE SOUTHWEST FRACTIONAL QUARTER OF SECTION 29, TOWNSHIP 41 NORTH, RANGE 13 EAST OF THE THIRD PRINCIPAL MERIDIAN, DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS: COMMENCING AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE EAST LINE OF THE WEST 583.33 FEET OF SAID WEST HALF WITH THE NORTH LINE OF LOT 9 IN ASSESSOR'S DIVISION OF PART OF SAID SECTION 29; THENCE NORTH 89°11 '48" EAST, ALONG SAID NORTH LINE, 279.98 FEET TO THE EAST LINE OF THE WEST 863.25 FEET OF SAID WEST HALF; THENCE SOUTH 0°25'02" WEST, ALONG SAID EAST LINE, 515.05 FEET TO A POINT OF BEGINNING; THENCE NORTH 89°37'48" WEST 215.00 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 2°07'48" EAST 78.44 FEET; THENCE SOUTH 11°31 '47" EAST 75.00 FEET TO THE NORTH LINE OF THE SOUTH 50.00 FEET OF SAID WEST HALF; THENCE NORTH 89°48'12" EAST, ALONG SAID NORTH LINE, 196.00 FEET TO AFORESAID EAST LINE OF THE WEST 863.25 FEET OF SAID WEST HALF; THENCE NORTH 0°25'02" EAST, ALONG SAID EAST LINE, 149.81 FEET TO THE POINT OF BEGINNING; ALL IN COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS, AND CONTAINING 0.72 ACRES, MORE OR LESS, THEREIN.

### Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries are determined by the edges of the plaza that was developed around the Leaning Tower of Niles.

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title	<u>Katarzyna Thake</u>	date	<u>8/21/2018</u>
organization	<u>Village of Niles</u>	telephone	<u>847-588-8006</u>
street & number	<u>1000 Civic Center Dr.</u>	email	<u><a href="mailto:kmt@vniles.com">kmt@vniles.com</a></u>
city or town	<u>Niles</u>	state	<u>IL</u> zip code <u>60714</u>



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**Additional Documentation**

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **GIS Location Map (Google Earth or BING)**
- **Local Location Map**
- **Site Plan**
- **Floor Plans (As Applicable)**
- **Photo Location Map** (Include for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map and insert immediately after the photo log and before the list of figures).

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**Photographs:**

---

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 3000x2000 pixels, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

**Photo Log**

<b>Name of Property:</b>	<u>The Leaning Tower of Niles</u>		
<b>City or Vicinity:</b>	<u>Niles</u>		
<b>County:</b>	<u>Cook</u>	<b>State:</b>	<u>Illinois</u>
<b>Photographer:</b>	<u>Katarzyna Thake</u>		
<b>Date Photographed:</b>	<u>January 2019</u>		

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

<b>Photo 1 of 15:</b>	View of northwest, illustrating panoramic of plaza and base of tower.
<b>Photo 2 of 15:</b>	View of south end of tower, illustrating exterior stairs.
<b>Photo 3 of 15:</b>	View of north side of tower, illustrating from street.
<b>Photo 4 of 15:</b>	View of northeast of Tower, illustrated from the plaza.
<b>Photo 5 of 15:</b>	View of the exterior angle looking up, illustrating close up of pilasters.
<b>Photo 6 of 15:</b>	View of the exterior base of tower leading to entry door.
<b>Photo 7 of 15:</b>	View of the exterior of bas relief above the entrance.
<b>Photo 8 of 15:</b>	View of the interior stairs, illustrating the first to second floor.
<b>Photo 9 of 15:</b>	View of one interior room, illustrating storage space on first floor.
<b>Photo 10 of 15:</b>	View of interior, illustrating a typical room on floors two through six.

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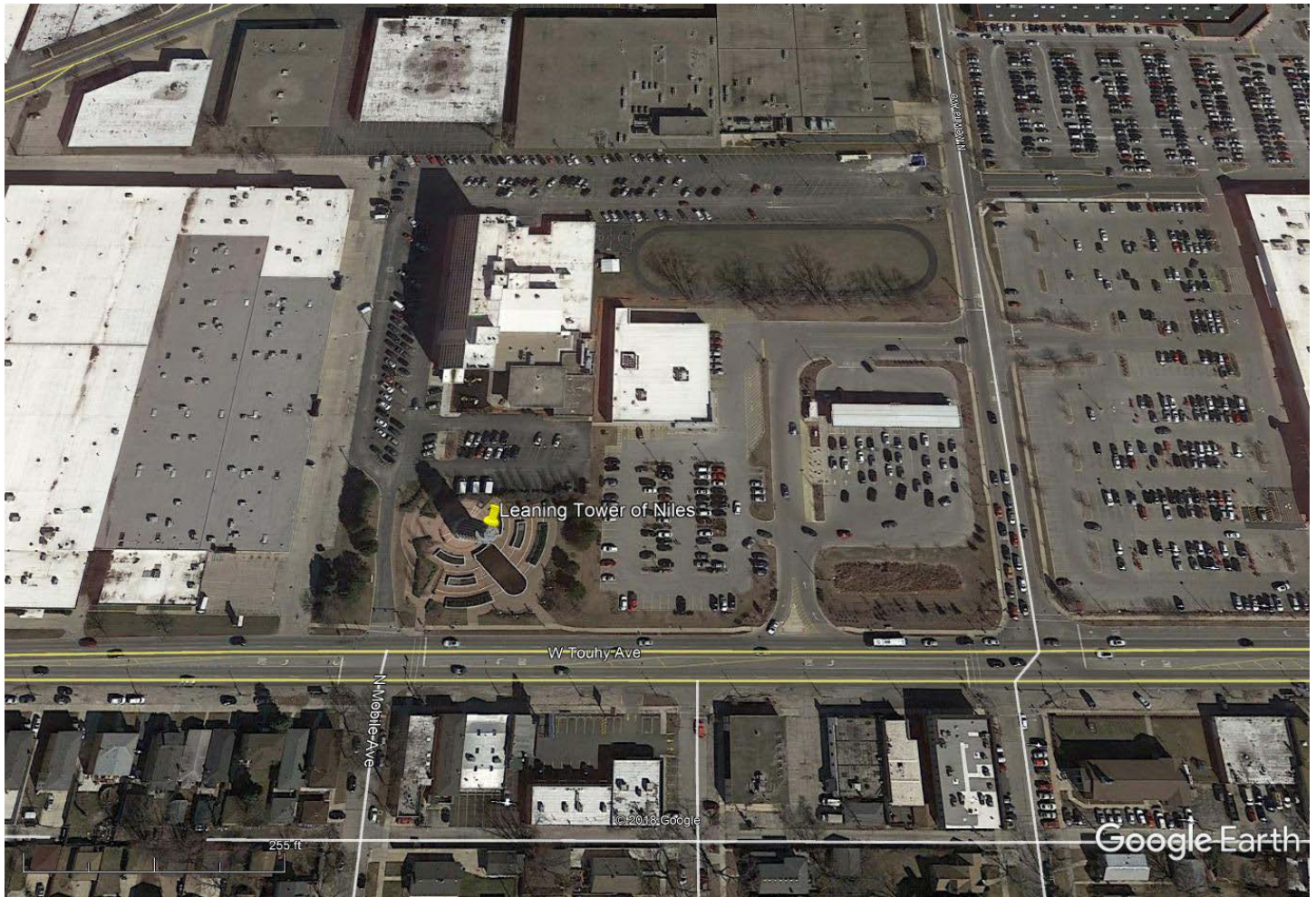
- Photo 11 of 15:** View of the interior staircase between floors 7th and 8<sup>th</sup>.
- Photo 12 of 15:** View of the interior eight floor bell, facing north of the Leaning Tower.
- Photo 13 of 15:** View of exterior detail of Stairs, illustrating a typical floor.
- Photo 14 of 15:** View of the exterior balcony illustrating a typical floor.
- Photo 15 of 15:** View of the exterior concrete columns.

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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### GIS Location Map

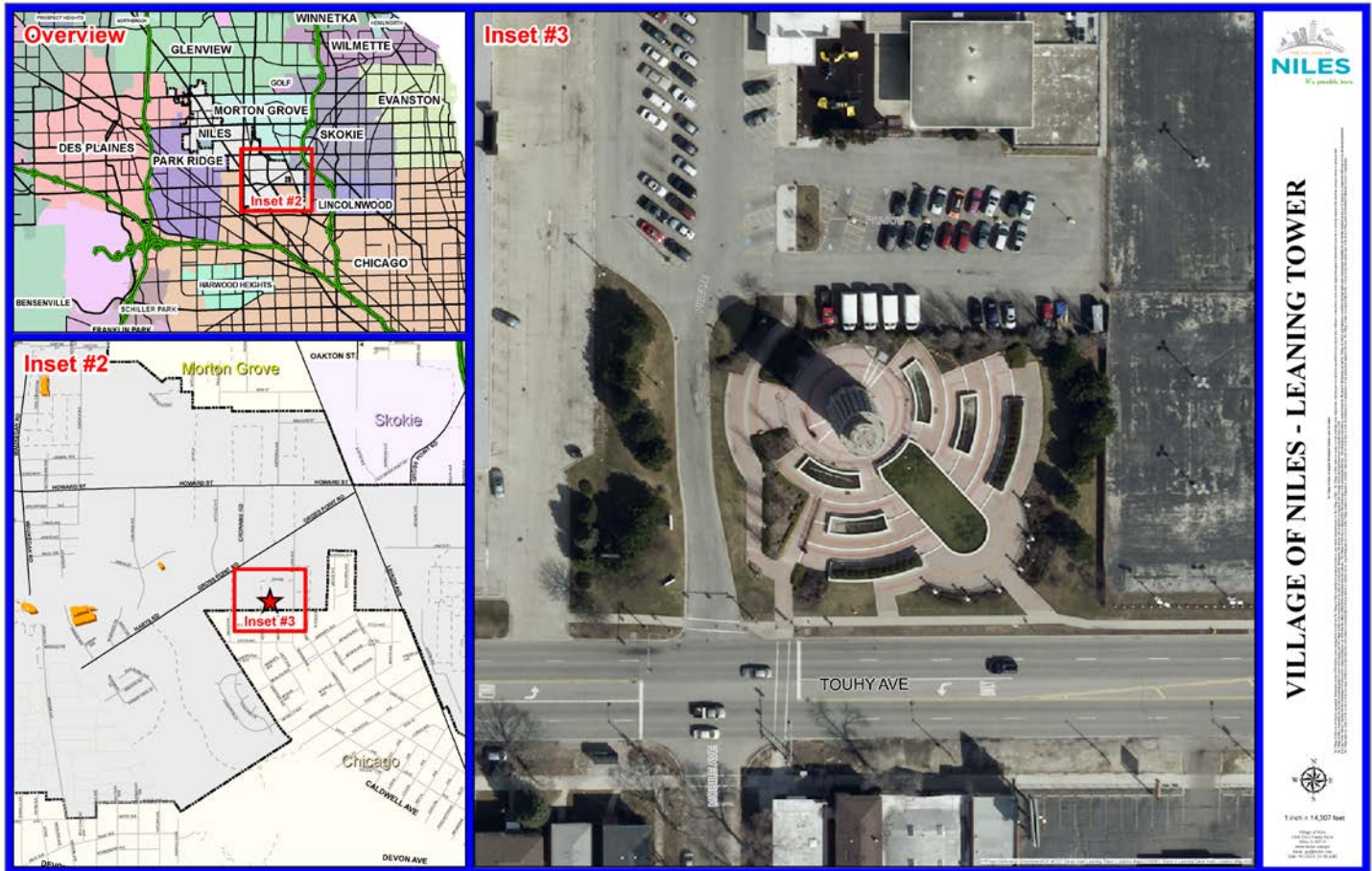
Leaning Tower of Niles  
6280 W. Touhy Avenue  
Niles, Cook County, IL

42° 0'44.67"N/ 87°47'2.27"W



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Local Location Map

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Site Plan

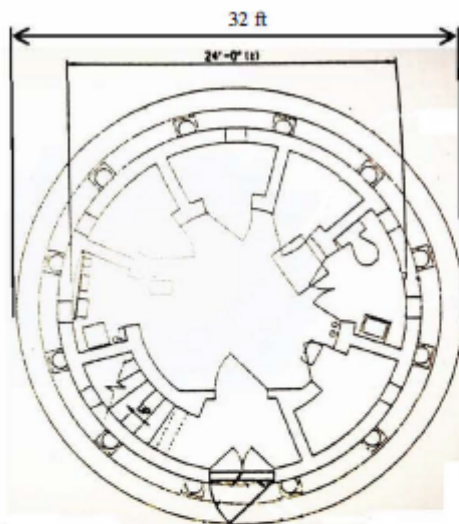


The Leaning Tower of Niles

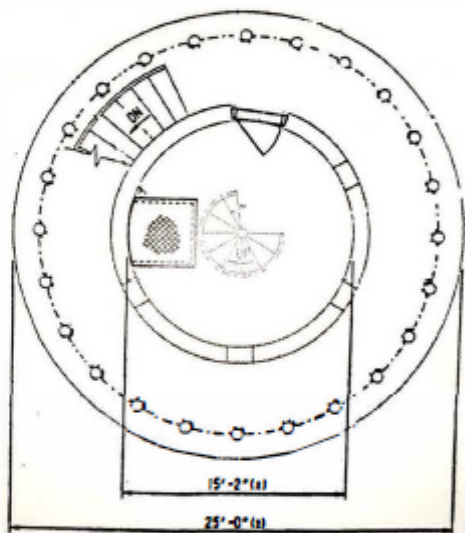
Name of Property

Cook, Illinois

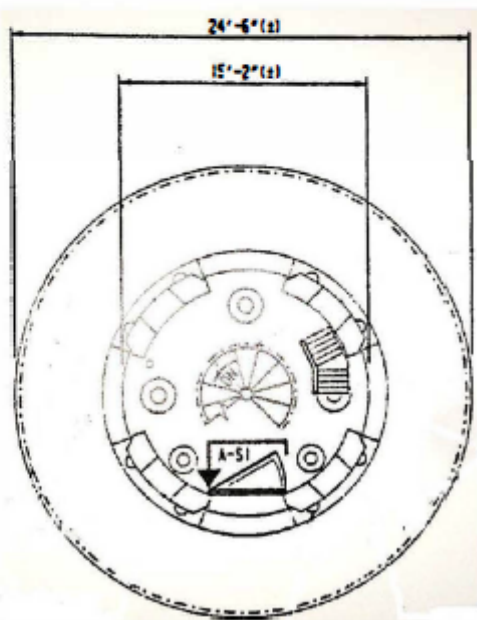
County and State



Plan view of ground level.



Plan view of typical floor.



Plan view of 8th floor.

*Plan views of Leaning Tower of Niles.*

Section Plan, pre 1995, showing the spiral staircase in the center.

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**List of Figures**

(Resize, compact, and paste images of maps and historic documents in this section. Place captions, with figure numbers above each image. Orient maps so that north is at the top of the page, all document should be inserted with the top toward the top of the page.)

Figure 1: Construction of the Tower, ca. 1933

Figure 2: Postcard of Ilgair Park ca. 1934. Village of Niles.

Figure 3: Tower after the plaza was built, ca. 1996.

Figure 4: Niles Tower next to Leaning Tower. Michelle Schuman, "How to See Famous European Monuments Without Leaving the United States." Jan 23, 2015. Groupon. Retrieved 18 Jan 2019.

<https://www.groupon.com/articles/road-trip-itinerary-european-monument-replicas-in-the-us-ga>

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**Figure 1: Construction of the Tower, ca. 1933**



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Figure 2: Postcard of Ilgair Park circ. 1934

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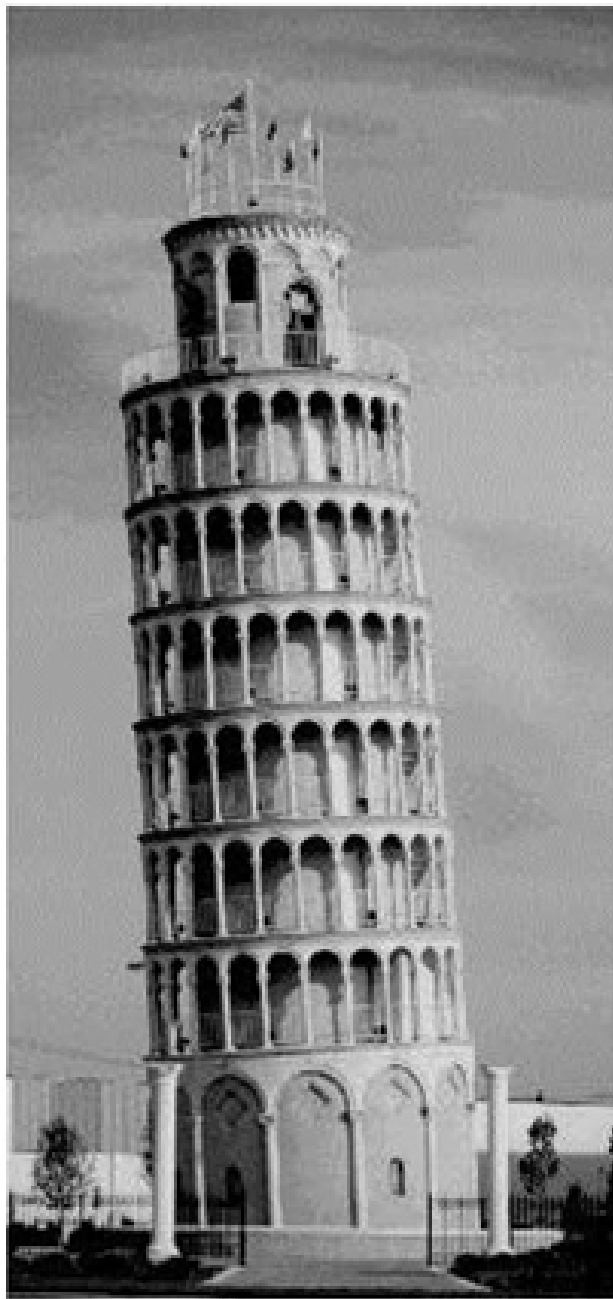


Figure 3: Tower after the plaza was built, ca. 1996.

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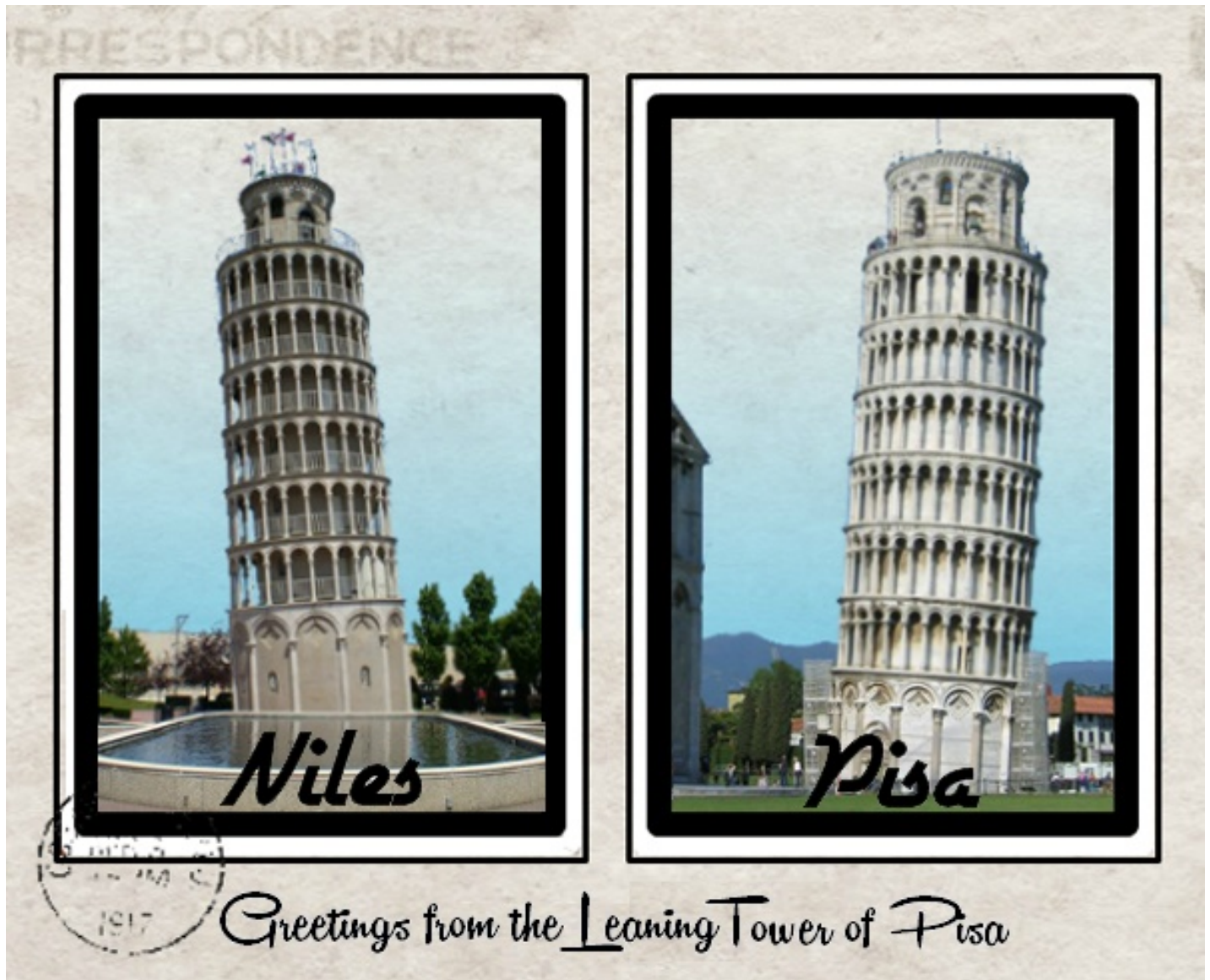


Figure 4: Niles Tower next to Leaning Tower.